WORD INSCAPES IN G. M. HOPKINS' POETIC THEORY

Kathryn A. Tietz Treece

(1)

In 1918 no less than the poet laureate himself, Robert Bridges, completed the job of publishing posthumously the verse of his good friend, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit priest. The fact that Bridges delayed the task for some 30 years after Hopkins' death can be forgiven: we are fortunate to have the poems at all, plus Hopkins' side of the correspondence between the two men.

Why Bridges took so long is cause for speculation. It has been said he knew only too well the prevailing Victorian taste in poetry, and that Hopkins' verse would have been misunderstood or worse, ignored; in fact, it did take twelve years to sell the original 750 copies. However, I can't help wondering whether Bridges was hoping for some change to occur, not so much in the attitudes of the age, but in his own attitude towards, and understanding of, Hopkins' work. His critical introduction to the 1918 edition offered little evidence of such a change. He himself was the one with Victorian sensibilities, and the best he could do for Hopkins was to point out the poet's faults in taste, his ill-advised dependence on "Oddity and Obscurity," the repellent rhythms, and the idiosyncracies of his logic. As for the positive aspects of the verses, he asks the reader to be "tolerant" despite these bad errors: "masterly beauties" are there, but they must be "searched out."(1) It seems that Bridges was impervious to the Hopkins' magic which later won him praise and recognition as the first of the modern poets.

Undoubtedly, Hopkins' poetry presents a challenge—not only to

the Robert Bridges of the early twentieth century, but also to new readers of this age, and especially to those who may read his poetry using a language which is not their native one. But all these readers can find encouragement in the sound advice which Hopkins himself gave: "Take breath, and read [my poetry] with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right."(2) The advice is simple and not really a very remarkable thing for a poet to say; but the reason for the advice is quite remarkable and is intricately bound to Hopkins' theory of "inscape." It is his belief in the inscape of language that I wish to explore here with the hope that your future reading in Hopkins may be more meaningful.

(2)

As a beginning place, let us first examine briefly what Hopkins meant by "inscape."

Being gifted in art and music, Hopkins was continually concerned with detail, harmony, and design. His note-book is filled with both pungent phrases and long descriptive paragraphs about those particularities of nature that could not escape his microscopic eye. They did not elude him because he had trained himself to search for inscape. Very simply, this term refers to the outward manifestation of an inward pattern:(3) an inner landscape proclaiming the individuality and self-hood of a thing. The energy that made the inscape alive and held it together was called the "instress." The following are examples of how Hopkins regarded the world around him through inscaping:

> Spanish chestnuts: their inscapes here bold, jutty, somewhat oak-like, attractive, the branching visible and the leaved peaks spotted so as to make crests of eyes.(4)
> The Horned Violet is a pretty thing, gracefully lashed. Even in withering the flower ran through beautiful inscapes by the screwing of the petals into straight little barrels or tubes.(5)

> I thought how sadly beauty of inscape was unknown and buried away from simple people and yet how near at hand it was if they had eyes to see it and it could be called out everywhere again . . .(6)

Hopkins' own poetic description of inscape was "the dearest freshness deep down things."(7)

Such observation of nature was not secular or pantheistic. Nature's attraction was in its variety of shape, sound, color, and light, but its essence was from God. God alone inscaped the world. Every thing, from the lowest bit of inanimate matter to the most "highly pitched, selved and distinctive" thing in creation, man's own mind, has an inscape individually given by God.(8)

Inscape is not grasped by everyone to the same degree; to apprehend it required action on the part of the perceiver, a spiritual seeing into. In his daily encounters with people and events, Hopkins was often granted the seeing almost effortlessly, and at other times, he worked hard at it, going for long and lonely walks or initiating intense meditation. Sometimes he was unrewarded.

To help us enter the sort of world that Hopkins must have known from time to time, Donald McChesney offers a most interesting modern parallel. He quotes Alan Watts, Zen Buddhist authority and counter culture leader, in his description of a controlled experiment with LSD:

> . . . my senses had been given a kaleidoscopic character . . . which made the world entrancingly complicated as if I were involved in a multidimensional arabesque. Colors became so vivid that flowers leaves and fabrics seemed to be illumined from inside. The random patterns of blades in a lawn seemed to be exquisitely organized without, however, any distortion of vision . . . What are ordinarily dismissed as irrelevant details of speech behaviour and form seemed to be in some indefinable way to be highly significant. Listening to music with closed eyes, I beheld

> the most fascinating patterns of dancing jewellry, mosaic, tracery and abstract images . . . Ordinary remarks seemed to reverberate with double and quadruple meanings . . .[9]

While Watts denied it as mystical, yet his experience echoes what Hopkins stresses again and again: freewheeling diversity, color, randomness which somehow reflects pattern, the illumined intensity of all life, the multiple meanings and levels of words. As this quotation and Hopkins' own poetry reveal, there is an underlying seething energy which most of us are unaware of most of the time. But it was Hopkins' gift to know that "all the world is full of inscape,"[10] to see the inscaping often, and occasionally to manifest it in verse. And for this poet, to know, to see, and to manifest inscape were all part of giving glory to God.

(3)

The reference to language in the Watts' quotation above is significant. Just as Hopkins worked hard to see the inscapes of nature, he also worked hard at capturing inscapes in language. W. A. M. Peters has said that to Hopkins "a word was as much an individual as any other thing," and so he "did not rest until he knew the word as a self."[11]

In visual inscapes, there are lines, shapes, and colors; in people, inscape refers not only to their appearance but also to their expression of themselves—as blacksmith, as musician, as a nun dying in shipwreck. But what was Hopkins looking for in the inscape of a word? Where is the pattern to be found? Black marks on a white page are surely not enough. Rather, a word's inscape (the outward manifestation of an inward pattern) is revealed in its sound. When its sound inscape is caught, then it can properly "show off" its essence and individuality.

This accounts for the many meticulous and ingenious philological notes which readers of the early Hopkins' journals are well familiar

with. With his extensive knowledge of Greek, Latin, Welsh, and English dialects, he continually grouped sounds, seeking related pairs and sets of words. The following are good examples of the sorts of connections he delighted in:

> *Grind, gride, gird, groat, grate, greet,* κρούειν, *crush, crash,* κροτεῖν etc.
>
> Original meaning to *strike, rub,* particularly *together.* That which is produced by such means is the *grit,* the *groats* or *crumbs,* like *fragmentum* from *frangere, bit* from *bite. Crumb, crumble* perhaps akin. To *greet,* to strike the hands together (?). *Greet,* grief, wearing, *tribulation.* Grief possibly connected. *Gruff,* with a sound as of two things rubbing together. I believe all these words to be onomatopoetic. *Gr* common to them all representing a particular sound. In fact I think the onomatopoetic theory has not had a fair chance. Cf. *crack, creak, croak, crake, graculus, crackle.* These must be onomatopoetic.(12)

> *skill,* originally I believe to divide, discriminate. From same word or root *shell* (in a school), *shilling* (division of a pound), and they *school* (both of boys and whales), *shoal, scale* (of fish), *keel,* etc. *Skill* meaning to cut, divide . . .(13)

The notes were carried over into the making of his verse as with the following two lines written shortly after the notation on *skill*:

> She schools the flighty pupils of her eyes,
> With levell'd lashes stilling their disquiet . . .

The striking thing here, of course, is Hopkins' dependence on the sound to bring him to the sense of a word. It is significant that in the first quotation he is reminded of the onomatopoetic theory of language, to which I will refer later.

(4)

It should be no surprise to go one more step and discover that

Hopkins depends on sound, too, to bring him his poem and the sense of his poem. His aesthetic theory demanded that beauty be "a progression of inscapes."(14) Poetry, then, is a composition of individual sound inscapes *and* an inscaped composition. In other words, by first paying close attention to the sounds of individual words, a pattern of sound will emerge; this pattern will be energized, unified, and beautiful. Hopkins saw such patterns all around him in nature, and so it must be in language, too: nature shines with its visual shapes while language reverberates with its aural shapes. According to Hopkins, these aural shapes are pleasing in and of themselves for he believed that poetry is "speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning."(15) He worked hard in his poetry not merely to convey the inscapes which he saw; but more importantly, to reveal word inscapes, one after another, thus creating a new inscape when the poem is read as a whole.

To make the concept clearer, Hopkins refers us to our experience with music. Though it uses wordless sound patterns, music is laden with meaning. No one would argue that music must have some quality other than its pattern (inscape) of sound to make it meaningful. Likewise, Hopkins believed that "poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake."(16) Pattern was in the sound, not in the meaning, so sound must be attended to first. Thus, he aimed at a delicate tension between prose and music: the musical, non-logical sound was more important, and yet the materials of his craft were words with their set syntax and logical meaning.

(5)

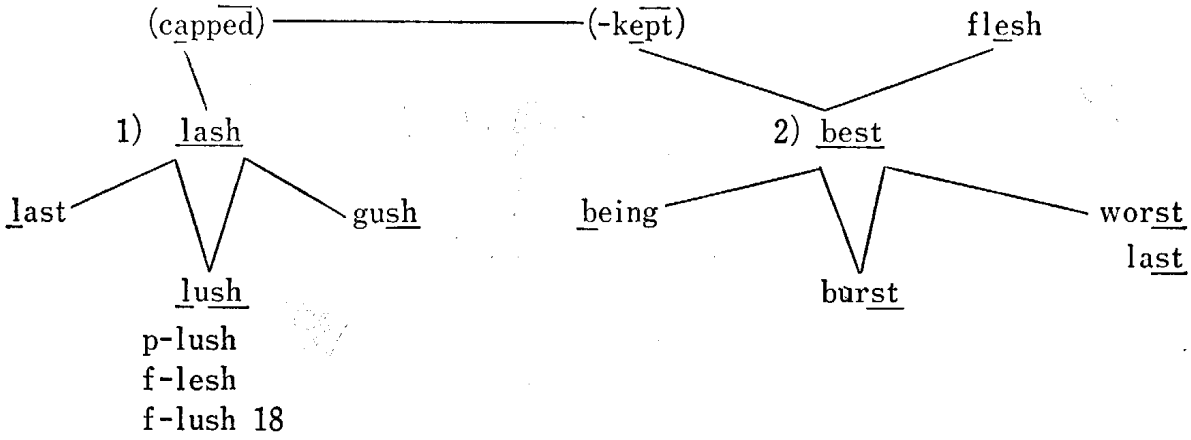
If you have ever read Hopkins and if you have had difficulty, it should be evident why the difficulty is there: normal word order, unambiguous meaning, and smoothness all take second place to intricate alliteration, inverted order, word omission, vowelling-on,

and vowelling-off, all techniques he used for showing off sound at the expense of grammar and prosaic expectations.

McChesney points out that Hopkins' poetic art was greatly stimulated by his study of Welsh and the discovery of *cynghanedd*, an ancient bardic tradition used for producing intricate and beautiful speech sounds.[17] He adapted the system for English, and the results sprang forth full-blown in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, written after seven years of poetic silence. Part of the eighth stanza gives a full display of his near continuous use of alliteration and vowelling:

> We lash with the best or worst
> Word last! How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe
> Will, mouthed to flesh-burst,
> Gush!—flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet,
> Brim, in a flash, full!

W. H. Gardner has charted this passage according to its intricate net of sound repetitions:



A sound map like this clarifies Hopkins' notion of language inscape as pattern and harmony among sounds. It also reminds the newcomer not to become bogged down in unfamiliar syntax or word by word understanding but to go to the sound-shape of the poem for swifter comprehension.

Hopkins claimed that poetic language of this type was "heightened" and would never become obsolete as he felt Swinburne's and Tennyson's poetry must become. He even sanctioned language being "unlike itself"[19] in order to break through conventional barriers of poetry. The result would be poems whose meaning is highly concentrated and which in turn demand concentration from the reader.

(6)

Because of Hopkins' preference for sounds, his poems, on first reading, may teeter on the edge of nonsense; that is, the sounds appeal and the rhythms bounce around in the head like an advertising jingle that won't go away, but finally there is little to meditate on, for the poet is only playing games with words. Good examples are these by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, followed by two examples from Hopkins.

Lettuce! O Lettuce!
Let us, O let us,
O Lettuce leaves,
O let us leave this tree and eat
Lettuce, O let us, Lettuce leaves![20]

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
  Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
  And the mome raths outgrabe.[21]

So be beginning, be beginning to despair.
O there's none; no no no there's none:
Be beginning to despair, to despair,
Despair, despair, despair, despair.
    Spare!
("The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo")

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock?
("Carrion Comfort")

G. M. Hopkins played with words, too, but he also asked that the mind and emotions be engaged in the play. How can it be that as he skirts nonsense and strives after music, Hopkins still gives us sense and communicates depth of feeling?

I believe the answer lies in a profound onomatopoeia, going far beyond the usual recognition of imitative sounds, like *buzz, squeak,* or *roar.* There of course has always been a favorite theory among theologians and linguistic dilletantes, let alone serious linguists, of the existence of an *Ursprache,* the original language whose sound and sense were unified in a metaphysical bond ordained by God. This theory proposes that the sound of the word perfectly chimed with the essence of what it described. I myself enjoy imagining what such a language and such a world were like, but along with most modern linguists, I have let the great nineteenth century search for the *Ursprache* go: the evidence is too diffuse and speculative to be worth pursuing.

On the other hand, onomatopoeia is still a source of strong interest among linguists, but it is interesting in two, and apparently contradictory, ways.

One way says that just as there are universals in grammatical and phonetic structures, might there not also be universals in sound symbolism? There has already been a good bit of study in this area, with Roman Jakobson perhaps being the foremost authority. His chapter on "The Spell of Speech Sounds" in *The Sound Shape of Language* is an excellent overview of the work done on universal sound symbolism. For instance, he cites Fónagy's 1963 tests with groups of Hungarian children and adults. The impressive results showed that the sound /i/ was quicker, smaller, prettier, friendlier, harder, whereas /u/ was thicker, hollower, darker, sadder, blunter,

bitterer, and stronger. /r/ was revealed as wild, pugnacious, manly, rolling, and harder when contrasted with /l/.[22] Jakobson makes a plea for more of this kind of study, done scientifically, on "the sound-symbolic typology of languages, and the sound-symbolic universals ensuing from such a typology."[23]

The other onomatopoetic approach says that "sounds are not expressive in themselves; it is only when they happen to fit the meaning that their onomatopoetic potentialities come into their own."[24] This is easily illustrated with homonyms, one being onomatopoetic and the other not: the *pealing* of a bell with the *peeling* of potatoes, or a *ring* at the door with a wedding *ring*. It also negates universal sound symbolism by citing examples of words that do not comply; for instance, /i/ with its usual meaning of smallness does not apply to *big*, or words of other languages like German *Riese*, "giant." This does not mean that onomatopoeia is not present in language, but rather that a suitable environment is vital in order for a word to have harmony between sense and sound. The linguist Sieberer has put it this way, "Onomatopeia will ignite only when the expressive possibilities latent in a given sound are, as it were, brought to life by contact with a congenial meaning."[25]

(7)

I said earlier that these two approaches to onomatopoeia seem contradictory. The first way posits that our languages are already filled with sound and sense harmony; the second posits that the harmony is there only if we make it so. I submit that both of these ways are at work in language and that Hopkins' special temperament and genius exploited both.

Applying the first theory emphasizes the priest in the poet: attunement with nature through mysticism, and insight into what he saw as God's order were so strong that he was able to tap, consciously and unconsciously, the universal sound patterns that carry meaning. The linguist Edward Sapir said that Hopkins indulged

freely his "wild joy in the sheer sounds of words"[26] and was confident that they brought meaning with them—because God existed and "chance left free to act falls into an order."[27]

Take, for example, his stream of fronted vowels and fluid /l/ to express youth, innocence and beauty in "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo":

> Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maiden gear, gallantry and gaiety and grace,
> Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace—

Alternatively, he uses multisyllables, /r/, and backed vowels to suggest the approach of evening in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves":

> Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, ' vaulty voluminous, ... stupendous
> Evening strains to be time's vást, ' womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.

The second theory of onomatopoeia emphasizes the poet in the priest: through poetic theory, dialect study, word etymology, and re-writing, Hopkins took pains to find the exact sound with a "congenial meaning." For instance, all the individual words in this excerpt from "The Sea and the Skylark" cannot be said to be sound symbolic, but Hopkins' masterly combination of them makes us feel as though we ourselves rise with the bird:

> Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,
> His rash-fresh re-winded new-skeinéd score
> In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour
> And pelt music, till none's to spill or spend.

Another description of a bird in flight is found in the opening lines of "The Windhover." Aided by Hopkins' special rhythmic technique, the sounds of these words give a breathless swing to the speech,

imitative of the falcon's soaring high above:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he hung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy!

Time and again, Hopkins shows his genius at creating what Sieberer calls the "resonance effect," whereby the sound reverberates with meaning from being used in an effective environment.(28)

(8)

I hope that by now it is clear why Hopkins pleads that his poetry be read out loud in order to be understood. He literally packed his verse with alliteration, vowel play, word repetition, and interior rhyme to make a package of energy whose potential is only let loose in sound. Whether their meaning is there by divine fiat or by the poet's skill, the selves of individual words had been recognized and "called out" to participate in a larger self, the poem; the poem's self, in turn, must also be called out. When this is done, Hopkins believed that, as in a riddle or as in music, meaning would come as fast as the ear heard, or that the word's energies would bring their meaning at a later time and suddenly *explode*.

I would like to conclude with part of a letter that Hopkins wrote to his youngest brother, Everard, in 1885. Though he does not specifically refer to a theory of words or language inscapes here, nevertheless it is because of his passion for the selves of words and for the whole inscaped composition that he asks us to speak aloud his poems:

I am sweetly soothed by your saying that you cd. make any one understand my poem by reciting it well. That is what I always

hoped, thought, and said: it is my precise aim.... Every art... and every work of art has its own play or performance. The play or performance of a stage-play is the playing it on the boards, the stage: reading it, much more writing it, is not its performance. The performance of a symphony is not the scoring it however elaborately; it is in the concert room, by the orchestra, and then and there only. A picture is performed, or performs, when anyone looks at it in the proper and intended light. A house performs when it is now built and lived in. To come nearer: books play, perform, or are played and performed when they are read.... Poetry was originally meant for either singing or reciting.... [Poetry has come to be read] by one reader, alone, to himself, with the eyes only. This is not the true nature of poetry, the darling child of speech, of lips and spoken utterance: it must be spoken; *till it is spoken it is not performed,* it does not perform, it is not itself.[29]

NOTES

(1) As quoted from 'Preface to Notes,' *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* in *Gerard Manley Hopkins, Poems,* Casebook Series, ed. Margaret Bottrall (London: MacMillan Press, 1975), p. 47.

(2) As quoted from *A Preface to Hopkins* by Graham Storey (London: Longman, 1981), p. 69.

(3) Maurice B. McNamee, S. J., "Hopkins: Poet of Nature and of the Supernatural," in *Immortal Diamond,* ed. Norman Weyand, S. J. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), p. 227.

(4) *G. M. Hopkins, Selected Prose,* ed. Gerald Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 43.

(5) *The Journals and Papers of G. M. Hopkins,* eds. Humphry House and Graham Storey (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 211.

(6) *Hopkins, Selected Prose,* Roberts, p. 55.

(7) "God's Grandeur," *G. M. Hopkins, Poems and Prose,* ed. W. H. Gardner (Penguin Books, 1953), p. 27. All subsequent quotations from Hopkins' poems will be taken from this edition.

(8) Donald McChesney, *A Hopkins Commentary* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p. 22.

(9) As quoted from "The Meaning of 'Inscape'" by Donald McChesney in *G. M. Hopkins, Poems.* ed. Bottrall, *op. cit.*, pp. 203–204.

(10) *Journals and Papers,* p. 230.

(11) *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay Towards the Understanding of his Poetry* (London, 1948), pp. 141–142.

(12) *Journals and Papers,* p. 5.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 25.

(14) As quoted from *Gerard Manley Hopkins* by W. H. Gardner (London: Oxford University Press), I, p. 194.

(15) *Journals and Papers,* p. 289.

(16) *Ibid.*

(17) McChesney, "The Meaning of 'Inscape,'" *op. cit.*, p. 209.

(18) W. H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), II, p. 142.

(19) *Hopkins, Selected Prose,* ed. Roberts, p. 80.

(20) As taken from "Making Earnest of Game; G. M. Hopkins and Nonsense Poetry," by David Sonstroem, in *The Modern Language Quarterly,* XXVIII (June 1967), p. 193.

(21) "Jabberwocky" in *The Annotated Alice,* with Martin Gardner (New York: Meridian Books, 1963), p. 191.

(22) Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 187.

(23) *Ibid.*

(24) Stephen Ullman, *Semantics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p. 86.

(25) As quoted in Ullman, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

(26) "Review of *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins,*" *Poetry,* XVIII (1921), p. 331.

(27) *Journals and Papers,* p. 230.

(28) Ullman, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

(29) As quoted from *A Preface to Hopkins,* Storey, pp. 69–70.